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ABSTRACT

Educational research is designed to generate valid and reliable information needed by decision-makers. The issue of research utilization is of utmost importance, especially as it relates to the federal government; however, much of the research has not found its way into the policymaking process. This issue precipitated a survey of 141 Mid-South Research Association (MSERA) members who presented papers at the 1988 MSERA annual meeting soliciting their views on the significant gaps between educational research and the implementation of educational policy (61 surveys were returned). Survey results showed that 53 percent of the respondents produced papers which had recommendations, results, or ideas that could have impact on making educational policy or changing current practices. Seventy-eight percent of the 53 percent forwarded the results of their work to persons in policymaking positions. Of the 78 percent, 76 percent indicated that the policymakers considered their recommendations. Of the studies for which the recommendations were forwarded, 72 percent brought about some sort of change. Appended is a copy of the survey with annotated responses as well as explanations for two survey questions. (15 references) (SI)

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# IMPACT OF MSERA RESEARCH ON POLICY DECISIONS

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## IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON POLICY DECISIONS

One of the primary purposes of educational research is to generate valid and reliable information needed by decision makers. While this goal is admirable and simplistic, it represents a challenge to all who work to improve education whether at the preschool or the university level.

The "business of education" has become increasingly more complex, more extensive, and more expensive. Such conditions place greater demands upon the research community to narrow the gap between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Questions addressed by educational policymakers are becoming more sophisticated, and in turn, educational researchers are delving more deeply into complex research issues. (Fox, 1989)

This is not a new problem, and the problem has not been void of its own research. We have established intermediary institutions like advisory bodies, networks, technologies, and varying modes of presenting our research findings to a variety of target groups in policy and in practice. In the words of Eric Hoyle (1985):

> A number of very different approaches to an understanding of the nature of knowledge and its transmission have undermined earlier simplistic notions of a rational sequence whereby the product of educational research is transmitted as a neutral body of knowledge via impersonal modes of communication to passively-accepting practioners who will apply it in undiluted form to their practical problems. Whatever the ultimate degree of 'objectivity' which research data might have, there is little doubt that it will be interpreted, negotiated, and transformed by the social systems through which it is diffused.

The issue of research utilization is of utmost importance, especially as it relates to the federal government—the largest consumer of policy research. However, much of the research has not found its way into the policymaking process. The general consensus is summarized by Carol Weiss (1973) when she states, "Relatively few evaluation studies have had a noticeable effect on the

making of public policy." The problem of providing policy-relevant information is not only a problem for federal policymakers. As educational researchers we are concerned about educational decision making and the utilization of research by decision makers at all levels. It was this issue that precipitated this study.

There are those who contend that the utilization of research is not necessarily the concern of the researcher. Kerlinger (1977) asserted that the question of how research has influenced practice has been answered "systematically, empirically, and competently" in medicine, but not in education. He claimed "there is little direct connection between research and educational practice," and "basic research is more important than applied research in its potential effect on education." He says it is a false assumption to assume educational research can solve educational problems and that "Educational research does not lead directly to improvement in educational practice."

Clearly others (Tyler, 1984) (Berliner, 1984) have different views from Kerlinger and <u>are</u> concerned about the application and utilization of research. In Finn's (1988) discussion of what ails educational research, he contends that educational researchers have not produced results which have made "perceptible differences in people's lives". Like Kerlinger, he compares educational reseach to medical research but makes an analogy to explain why educational research is not taken seriously. He says "unlike AIDS, ignorance is no emergency. It's more like a chronic affliction.... It's been around for some time now, and isn't likely to go away soon." After reviewing 336 research proposals at the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), he deduced that the "most lamentable shortcoming I encountered was

that so many dealt with matters so esoteric or miniscule that they would benefit only a handful of people, assuming of course that they succeeded in doing what they proposed." He emphasized that the OERI "can fund only those proposals likely to deliver significant, generalizable, useful results."

Several well known educators have offered similar challenges for researchers. William Turnbull (1979) suggested research and development agendas should be set for seeking support for research. He proposed that for research to garner support from top-down programs, the research should:

1) Address problems conducive to research....
2) Address problems perceived as important by practitioners....
3) Make a difference in some form.
4) Attract the funding needed to do it....
5) Have a capacity for evolutionary change but have enough stability over time to explain important questions in depth.
6) Be capable of aggregation and cummulative over time...

Howe's (1976) suggestions for educational researchers included improving the quality of educational research; making research efforts produce demonstrably useful changes in education; and, learning to communicate with the people who must carry the research out. As U.S. Commissioner of Education, Bell (1975) proposed four similar recommendations to improve the relationship between educational research and the public interest. They were:

1) Put priorities on research ... target critical education issues.
2) Study real world issues.
3) Structure research designs in appropriate time frames.
4) Write concise reports that school people can understand.

Over the past years, several MSERA keynote speakers have stated that there are significant gaps between educational research and the development of implementing educational policy. In 1985, Robert Saunders of Memphis State University said that there is little coordination or linkage between policy, research, and practice. He mentioned that there is no systematic way to "force" the results of research findings into educational practice. In 1986, William Cooley of the University of Pittsburgh, spoke on "Decision-Oriented Research." A great portion of what we do under the guise of educational

research never sees the light of day as far as actually contributing to the improvement of education. Even though the educators cited above have offered prescriptions to assure the utilization of research, the literature has few indications of the amount of research which is actually applied in real world educational settings or the number of people who benefit from it.

This paper points out why the responsibility for closing this gap begins at home by providing a summary of the efforts of MSERA researchers in this area. A survey of MSERA members who presented papers at the 1988 annual meeting was conducted to determine:

1. How many papers produced recommendations or ideas which could have impacted educational policy or practices;
2. Whether the researchers or anyone working with them forwarded results of their work to those in positions to make policy changes;
3. Whether those in positions to make such decisions considered their recommendations;
4. Whether changes were actually brought about or planned as a result of the information being passed along, and if not, why;
5. The significance of the changes which were made; and
6. How many people benefitted from the results.

Responses received are annotated on the copy of the survey at Appendix A. Survey results showed that 53% of the respondents produced papers which had recommendations, results, or ideas which could have impact on making educational policy or changing current practices. It also indicated that 78% of that 53% forwarded the results of their work to assure that the persons in positions to make policy decisions were aware of their work or its recommendations. Of those individuals who forwarded results of their research to persons in policymaking positions, 76% indicated that the policymakers considered their recommendations. (Some of the people, 59%, did some sort of follow-up to see if their recommendations were seriously considered.) Of the

studies for which the recommendations were forwarded, 72% brought about some sort of change. Or, stated another way, 95% of those studies which were known to be considered by policymakers actually resulted in change or plans for change.

There are formal structures such as the U.S. Department of Education and its Office of Educational Research dedicated to providing educational leadership, solving national problems, and conducting programs to achieve excellence in education. They fund research and demonstration projects to improve education at all levels. However, it is clear by the dearth of reports in the literature on utilization of educational research studies that there is work enough in this area for all who are concerned about the field of education.

Productivity ratings of educational institutions are based on publications--the number of, and in which journals they appear. How many are based on the effectiveness or utilization of the research work emanating from these? Perhaps our measuring stick is a little off. Should we not be concerned about the use to which our research is put? Should we not be concerned about how many people benefitted from our research? Should we not take it upon ourselves to assure that the implications of our research reach those in positions to improve the educational systems. We offer this as a challenge to the members of MSERA.

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# APPENDIX A

**IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON POLICY DECISIONS**
(UTILIZATION OF MSERA RESEARCH)
A SURVEY

According to the 1988 MSERA proceedings, you were an author or co-author for a paper(s) presented at that meeting. Please respond to the following items concerning the utilization of that research.

**142 surveys sent out, 61 returned**

1. Did your paper(s) produce any recommendations, results or ideas which should or could have impact on making educational policy or changing current practices?
(a) YES **53%** (b) NO **47%**, If you checked "no", please return this questionnaire, and no additional responses are required. **Y=32 N=29**

2. If "yes", did anyone forward the results of your work or otherwise assure that the persons in positions to make policy decisions were aware of your work or its recommendations and ideas? **Y=25 N= 7 T=32**
(a) YES **78%** (b) NO **23%**

3. If not, why not? **No response received from 55. See Appendix B for 6 responses received.**

4. If "yes", did those individuals in policy-making positions consider your recommendations? **Y=19 ?= 6 T=25**
(a) YES **76%** (b) NO **0%** (c) DON'T KNOW **24%**

5. Did you or anyone else follow up to see if they seriously considered your recommendations? **Y=17 N= 2 ?=10**
(a) YES **59%** (b) NO **7%** (c) DON'T KNOW **35%**

6. Were any changes actually brought about, or are any planned as a result of the information being passed along? **Y=18 N= 1 ?= 9**
(a) YES **62%** (b) NO **3%** (c) DON'T KNOW **31%**

7. If not, why not? **Haven't followed up on it.** (one response)

8. If yes, how significant were the changes?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (a) insignificant | 6% | N= 1 |
| (b) somewhat significant | 33% | N= 6 |
| (c) significant | 39% | N= 7 |
| (d) very significant | 11% | N= 2 |
| (e) extremely significant | 11% | N= 2 |
| | | T=18 |

9. How many people benefitted by the results of your work?
Please estimate number. **received 8 responses with 38,205 benefitting**
Explain if necessary. **See Appendix C for 19 responses received.**

## APPENDIX B

EXPLANATIONS FOR SURVEY ITEM NUMBER 3

1. Findings were formative recommendations from a longitudinal study.
2. Time is limited. It has not been enough time to have input on policy.
3. Dissemination troublesome.
4. No reason for bringing researchers and policymakers together.
5. My presentation was improperly handled.
6. The material will be published this year. At that point it will be forwarded to appropriate persons.

## APPENDIX C

EXPLANATIONS FOR SURVEY ITEM NUMBER 9.

1. Hopefully, all who attended the session. I don't know about those to whom the results were sent.

2. All certified teachers in Mississippi.

3. District-wide career development indicators to provide generic profile in order to provide individualized staff development.

4. Parents, students, and other community members in Canada and U.S.

5. Students/participants who may implement grading system.

6. Community college and other schools continue to use research of the type presented i.. the session in which I was involved.

7. Some classroom teachers and their consultants.

8. I don't know yet. Possibly hundreds.

9. Paper was a methodological critique and more perhaps related to other researchers changing/adjusting methods.

10. Too soon to tell.

11. All kindergarten children in the state of Mississippi.

12. 33,000 pupils—250 administrators.

13. Because of my presntation I was asked to write further on this subject and submit for publication.

14. Resulted in changes in administration and evaluation in two states outside this region.

15. Will go into effect in the Fall of1989.

16. It changed some of the procedures in teacher education.

17. School system.

18. My papers are not about policy issues. Papers were published and resulted in book chapters for education textbooks.

19. College student body.